

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-03 H-02 INR-07 L-03

NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06

COME-00 EB-07 LAB-04 SIL-01 OMB-01 /071 W

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R 251641Z JUL 75

FM AMEMBASSY LONDON

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3203

INFO AMEMBASSY BONN

AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS

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E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PINT, PGOV, UK

SUBJECT: THE PRENTICE AFFAIR: A LOW-KEY INTERPRETATION

SUMMARY - OUTSPOKEN OVERSEAS DEVELOPMENT MINISTER PRENTICE WAS OUSTED AS LABOR CANDIDATE BY HIS CONSTITUENCY PARTY JULY 23. WHILE THIS DOES NOT CHANGE HIS STATUS AS A SITTING MP OR CABINET MINISTER, IT IS EMBARRASSING TO THE PARTY AND GOVERNMENT AND PAINFUL FOR PRENTICE. HE IS APPEALING THE DECISION, AND HAS OTHER POSSIBLE RECOURSE AS WELL. THE FULL IMPLICATIONS OF THIS EVENT ARE NOT LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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CLEAR, BUT THEY ARE LIKELY TO BE LESS SIGNIFICANT THAN

HAS BEEN SUGGESTED BY THE MEDIA. END SUMMARY.

1. OVERSEAS DEVELOPMENT MINISTER REG PRENTICE HAS BEEN UNDER FIRE FROM HIS CONSTITUENCY (NEWHAM NORTHEAST) LABOR PARTY ORGANIZATION FOR MORE THAN A YEAR, AND THE SAGA REACHED ITS CLIMAX JULY 23 WHEN THE GENERAL MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE (GMC) VOTED 29 TO 19 TO DISMISS PRENTICE AS ITS CANDIDATE IN THE NEXT GENERAL ELECTION. WHILE THE GMC DECISION DOES NOT AFFECT PRENTICE'S TENURE AS A SITTING MP OR HIS CABINET POSITION AND WILL BE APPEALED TO THE LABOR PARTY'S NATIONAL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE (NEC), IT HAS BEEN PERCEIVED BY SOME, ESPECIALLY OTHER RIGHT WING LABOR MPS WHO ARE OUT OF STEP WITH THEIR CONSTITUENCY ORGANIZATIONS, AS A VERY DANGEROUS DEVELOPMENT.

2. WHILE THE DISMISSAL OF A SITTING MP BY HIS CONSTITUENCY PARTY IS BY NO MEANS UNPRECEDENTED (THERE WAS ONE CASE JUST BEFORE THE OCTOBER 1974 ELECTION AND TWO CASES PRIOR TO THE FEBRUARY ELECTION), THE PRENTICE AFFAIR IS UNIQUE IN SEVERAL RESPECTS: PRENTICE IS A CABINET MINISTER; HE HAS BEEN ESPECIALLY OUTSPOKEN ON ISSUES WHICH ARE UNPOPULAR WITH THE LEFT-WING; HE WAS ABLE TO ENLIST THE SUPPORT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, A MAJORITY OF HIS CABINET COLLEAGUES AND A MAJORITY OF THE PARLIAMENTARY LABOR PARTY (PLP) FOR HIS CAUSE; HE WAS NOT ACCUSED OF ANY "IDEOLOGICAL DEVIATION (HE FULLY SUPPORTS THE PARTY MANIFESTO); AND HIS CONSTITUENCY ORGANIZATION HAS BEEN CAPTURED BY A SMALL, DEDICATED BAND OF EXTREME LEFTISTS. THREE OTHER FACTORS, NONE OF THEM UNIQUE TO PRENTICE'S CONSTITUENCY, ALSO CONTRIBUTED TO HIS OUSTER: PRENTICE, ACCORDING TO OUR SOURCES, HAD LOST TOUCH WITH HIS CONSTITUENCY; THE LOCAL PARTY ORGANIZATION HAD BEEN COMPLACENT (IT IS A SAFE LABOR SEAT) AND INEFFECTIVE, PROVIDING AN EASY TARGET FOR LEFT-WING ACTIVISTS; AND THE DEMOGRAPHY OF A TRADITIONALLY WORKING CLASS NEIGHBORHOOD HAD BEEN ALTERED BY THE INFLUX OF YOUNG, MOSTLY WHITE COLLAR FAMILIES. FINALLY, THERE IS A GROWING, BUT BY NO MEANS EXTENSIVE, GRASS ROOT ACTIVITY DESIGNED TO FORCE MPS TO BE MORE RESPONSIVE TO THEIR LOCAL PARTIES. "CAMPAIGN FOR LABOR DEMOCRACY" (CLD) IS THE PRINCIPAL GROUP WORKING TO LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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EFFECT THIS REFORM, AND IT HAS ESPECIALLY STRONG SUPPORT FROM THE PARTY LEFT. TO THE BEST OF OUR KNOWLEDGE, HOWEVER, THE CLD WAS NOT DIRECTLY INVOLVED IN THE PRENTICE AFFAIR.

3. PRENTICE, IN A PRESS STATEMENT FOLLOWING THE GMC MEETING (HE WAS PRESENT AND DEFENDED HIS POSITION), STRESSED THAT HE WOULD APPEAL THE DECISION TO THE NEC WHICH HAS

THE FINAL WORD, THOUGH TECHNICALLY ITS DECISION COULD BE APPEALED TO THE ANNUAL LABOR PARTY CONFERENCE. IN THE EVENT THE APPEAL PROCESS FAILS, HE STILL HAS THE OPTIONS OF ATTEMPTING TO GET THE GMC TO REVERSE ITS DECISION AND OF SEEKING THE CONSTITUENCY NOMINATION PRIOR TO THE NEXT GENERAL ELECTION.

4. JUDGED SOLELY ON THE BASIS OF PREVIOUS CASES, PRENTICE'S PROSPECTS FOR A FAVORABLE RULING FROM THE NEC LOOK DIM. IN THE PAST THE NEC HAS LIMITED ITS ROLE TO REVIEWING THE RECORD TO ENSURE THE ACTION CONFORMED WITH LABOR PARTY RULES, AND A TECHNICAL ERROR IN THE PROCESS SEEMS

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UNLIKELY IN THIS CASE. AGAIN, HOWEVER, THE PRENTICE CASE MAY BE UNIQUE. PRIME MINISTER WILSON HAS INDICATED HE WILL FIGHT FOR PRENTICE AT THE NEC. SHOULD HE DECIDE TO FORCE THE ISSUE, THE NEC COULD WELL OVERRULE THE GMC. AS YET, HOWEVER, THE EXTENT TO WHICH WILSON IS PREPARED TO CARRY THE FIGHT IS NOT CLEAR. SHOULD HE FIGHT AND LOSE IN THE LEFT-WING DOMINATED NEC, HIS PRESTIGE WOULD BE DEALT A SERIOUS BLOW, AND HE MAY NOT WISH TO TAKE THE RISK, ESPECIALLY ON BEHALF OF A MINISTER WHO HAS NEVER BEEN PARTICULARLY RESPECTFUL TOWARDS HIM. THE OTHER MEANS OF REDRESS OPEN TO PRENTICE -- REVERSAL OR READOP-
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TION -- ARE AT LEAST EQUALLY PROBLEMATIC. THE FIRST WOULD REQUIRE A MAJOR SHAKE UP OF THE GMC WHICH IS COMPOSED OF ELECTED WARD DELEGATES, APPOINTED DELEGATES FROM AFFILIATED ORGANIZATIONS (E.G. TRADE UNIONS AND COOPERATIVE SOCIETIES) AND THE ELECTED CONSTITUENCY PARTY OFFICIALS. IT WOULD ENTAIL A MAJOR GRASS ROOTS EFFORT AND WOULD TAKE CONSIDERABLE TIME. READOPTION WOULD ALSO SEEM TO REQUIRE A SUBSTANTIAL CHANGE IN THE LOCAL LEVEL ORGANIZATION. PERHAPS PRENTICE'S MOST VIABLE OPTION IS TO SEEK NOMINATION IN ANOTHER, MORE CONGENIAL CONSTITUENCY. THIS, OF COURSE, WOULD BE AN ADMISSION OF DEFEAT AND FOR THAT REASON WILL PROBABLY ONLY BE SERIOUSLY CONSIDERED WHEN AND IF ALL OTHER POSSIBILITIES FAIL.

5. THE ENTIRE AFFAIR HAS RECEIVED EXTENSIVE MEDIA COVERAGE AND HAS BEEN THE SUBJECT OF ALARMIST EDITORIAL COMMENTARY WHICH STRESSED THE DANGER OF LABOR'S LEFT-WING AND SUGGESTED THAT HIS WAS MERELY THE FIRST MOVE IN A MASSIVE CAMPAIGN TO PURGE THE PLP OF MODERATE ELEMENTS. WHILE WE DO NOT WISH TO DIMINISH THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PRENTICE AFFAIR, MUCH OF THE MEDIA COMMENTARY IS EXAGGERATED AND CONTRIBUTES LITTLE TO UNDERSTANDING ITS ORIGINS AND IMPLICATIONS. WE DO NOT, FOR EXAMPLE, FORESEE A MASSIVE LEFT-WING EFFORT TO PURGE RIGHT-WINGERS. INDEED, OUR SOURCES IN THE PLP ESTIMATE THAT ONLY 10 TO 15 OF THEIR COLLEAGUES ARE IN ANY DANGER OF BEING OUSTED BY THEIR CONSTITUENCY PARTIES, AND THAT NUMBER INCLUDES LEFT-WINGERS AS WELL AS RIGHT. THEY ALSO SUGGEST THAT THIS RISK CAN BE MINIMIZED, IF NOT ELIMINATED, BY WORK AT THE GRASS ROOTS. FROM OUR PERSPECTIVE THE WHOLE, SAD BUSINESS SEEMS TO BE THE RESULT OF SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES' THE RESULTS OF WHICH ARE EMBARRASSING TO THE PARTY AND GOVERNMENT AND WHICH MAY BE TRAGIC FOR PRENTICE. IT ALMOST CERTAINLY DOES NOT FORESHADOW A GREAT CHANGE IN THE LABOR

PARTY OR ITS POLICIES.

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